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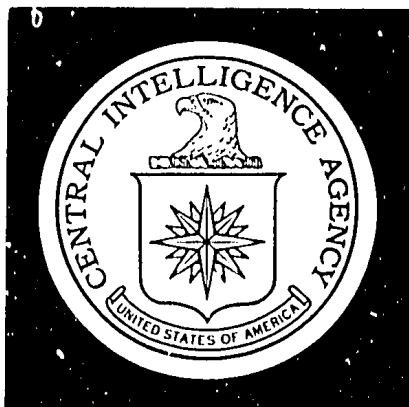
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DIRECTORATE OF
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WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

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Colombia to Hold Its Last Election Under the National Front

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COLOMBIA TO HOLD ITS LAST ELECTION UNDER THE NATIONAL FRONT

On 19 April Colombia will hold general elections for the last time under the National Front system of government. As the election date draws nearer, the Liberal and Conservative parties, the two major political organizations that make up the Front, are becoming increasingly disunited, principally over what dissident politicians consider the imposition of Misael Pastrana as the official Front candidate. It is the Conservatives' turn to occupy the presidency, and although Pastrana is a Conservative, he was handpicked by Liberal President Lleras. Many Conservative politicians believe he will make a weak president, thus opening the way for a Liberal victory in 1974. The serious schisms in these two parties may add to the growing dissatisfaction among the population, which has become weary with an artificial arrangement that often only allows them to approve a candidate, not choose him. Political stability probably will deteriorate as election day approaches.

BACKGROUND

The "Grand Coalition," as the National Front is often called, will end in 1974, 16 years after its establishment. It has been a unique institution for Colombia and, indeed, for the world. It was designed in 1957 to force the country's two largest and bitterly antagonistic political parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, to stop their politically motivated violence and to share power and office. The experiment was viewed by its formulators as a means to educate Colombians in the art of political compromise and to inculcate in the people the most difficult aspect of democratic political culture—the acceptance of the legitimacy of opposition. The coalition was also viewed as a means to retain real power in the hands of the social and economic elite while furthering Colombia's economic development.

The major feature of the Front, as set forth in constitutional amendments, was that the presidency would alternate between the two parties and that there would be parity for both in all public elective bodies, executive departments, and

administrative posts. One of the advantages of alternating the presidency purportedly was that over a 16-year period it would serve to educate the populace in democracy by accustoming Colombians to seeing the presidency shift peacefully between political parties. Decisions made by the legislative bodies required a two-thirds vote (recently changed to a simple majority) for passage, thus presumably forcing bipartisan cooperation on all legislation.

Over the years the coalition has succeeded in many of its aims. Most importantly, it has brought political peace, no small accomplishment in view of the fact that perhaps 100,000 or more people lost their lives in politically inspired violence from 1948 to 1958. Moreover, the Front has helped to build political consensus and stability, and has restored a large measure of political liberty. Economic progress has been favorable, especially since late 1960, and in the past two years President Lleras has been able to bring balance-of-payments difficulties under control and to reduce inflationary pressures. The country has entered a period of political stability and

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Misael PASTRANA
Borrero

Born on 14 November 1923 in Neiva, Huila Department, Pastrana has held number of prominent government positions including that of ambassador to the United States (November 1968 - September 1969); minister of government (July 1968 - September 1968); minister of finance (September - November 1961); minister of public works (1960/61) and minister of development (1959). If he is elected, US officials believe that he would guide his administration along lines that would be compatible with US policies.

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Evaristo SOURDIS

Born in North Coast Department of Atlantico on 29 March 1905, Sourdis has long been active in the Conservative Party. His past positions include that of president of the Unionista Conservative national directorate (1969); minister of foreign affairs (February-August 1960 and 1963-66); and minister of labor (1948-50). Sourdis appeared to be openly anti-American in the early 1940s. Since 1947, however, he has shown himself to be unfailingly pro-United States.

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economic growth (around six percent in the past two years) under the National Front system.

A price has been paid for these accomplishments, however. An increasingly high rate of voter abstention has meant that the government's claim to a solid popular base has become less and less credible. Factionalism among the political parties has also been a serious and persistent problem. Elections have made it obvious that there are important segments of the party faithful who do not subscribe wholeheartedly to the idea of joining forces with ancient enemies but who instead long for predominance.

Under the Front, only the two major parties can legally participate in the elections. These parties, however, are composed of various factions that are in effect separate parties. For example, the Conservative Party is divided into two major factions, the Ospinistas (named after former president Mariano Ospina Perez), and the Lauro-Alzatistas (made up of the followers of ex-president Laureano Gomez and Gilberto Alzate). In addition, other parties such as the National Popular Alliance and the Liberal Revolutionary Movement of the People—MRL del Pueblo—(the Communist Front) can run slates by calling themselves Conservatives or Liberals. It has always been legally possible for a group that is opposed to the concept of the National Front to win a majority in a general election. Such an outcome would call into question not only the particular composition of the government, but also the fate of programs formulated by both parties. As a result, the main issue in past elections has centered on the continuation of the Front.

CHOOSING THE FRONT CANDIDATE

Until last summer, former ambassador to the US Misael Pastrana was the favorite presidential candidate of the two major parties and enjoyed

the firm backing of most of the party leaders. After he returned to Colombia in mid-September, however, Pastrana's political image suffered from a series of faux pas made by him and his backers. For example, Pastrana's prestige dropped along with that of President Lleras, his sponsor, when Lleras misjudged the degree of public interest in charges of influence-peddling made by dissident Liberal Senator Vives against two key members of the Lleras administration. Although the President put his full prestige behind the two men, subsequent investigations forced both to resign.

Mariano Ospina, the leader of the majority faction of the Conservative Party, also miscalculated. He concealed his preference for Pastrana in hopes of holding a free convention that would merge all factions and arouse interest in the selection of a candidate. But in the process, Ospina allowed several men with regional strength to run as favorite sons, fully expecting that they would later rally to Pastrana at Ospina's request. Ospina, however, lost control of the convention, which was held in early November. Five minor candidates formed a "syndicate" to stop Pastrana, and on the first ballot, Atlantic Coast favorite Evaristo Sourdis won more votes than Pastrana but fewer than the required two-thirds majority. In a second ballot Pastrana and Sourdis tied.

Conservative leaders were unable to compromise, so both names were proposed to the Liberal convention, which also had to approve the candidate. On 5 December the Liberals finally chose Pastrana as the official candidate, but almost 100 of the 600 delegates to the convention walked out in protest against this prearranged selection. The dissidents threatened to organize a "popular" convention to pick their own candidate, but this convention has not yet materialized. Many of the dissidents favored maverick Conservative Belisario Betancur, who had been selected by his own "popular" convention in late October.

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Gustavo ROJAS
Pinilla

Considered by his critics one of the most ruthless dictators in recent Latin American history, Rojas was born on 12 March 1900 in Tunja, Department of Boyaca. A graduate of the Military Academy, his assignments included director general of the army (1949) and commander of the armed forces (1950-51 and 1952-53). He served as minister of posts and telegraphs (1949-50) and on 13 June 1953 he led a coup that overthrew Laureano Gomez and installed a "Government of the Armed Forces." He has stated that political relations between Colombia and the United States can and should be centrally planned by the Colombian Government but in a manner attractive to private business.

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Belisario BETANCUR
Cuatras

Betancur was born on 4 February 1923 in Amaga, Department of Antioquia. In 1962 he was one of the choices for the official Conservative presidential candidate, and from August 1962 to May 1963 he served as minister of labor. Resigning from his cabinet position, he placed himself in political limbo and did not officially re-emerge on the political scene until January 1969. A knowledge

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Pastrana has emerged as a rather unimpressive candidate. He has been guilty of many serious errors in his effort to win the support of party leaders and of the general public, and he does not have a regional base of political support. He has never been elected to any office, and he looks more like a middle-of-the-road bureaucrat than a dynamic political leader. Many view him as a "puppet" of the establishment.

THE OTHER CANDIDATES

At least three candidates other than Pastrana will participate in the coming elections, all under the Conservative Party label, as required. The most formidable is ex-dictator General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, leader of the National Popular Alliance (ANAPO), a rightist political grouping that opposes the National Front system. The demagogic ANAPO, which was formally organized in 1961, has participated in presidential and congressional elections since 1962, aiming its appeal at the middle and lower classes. Rojas' supporters are mainly from certain sectors of the urban poor, retired military personnel and government employees, segments of the rural population, and other groups that benefited from Rojas' presidency from 1953 to 1957. More recently, Rojas reportedly has picked up the support of various political groups, including the Communists and other leftists.

There are indications that dissident Senator Vives and his followers are forming a new political movement to support Rojas' presidential ambitions. The group reportedly is already organized in the Atlantic Coast area. An accomplished demagogue, Vives will be a valuable addition to the Rojas camp and will draw voters who oppose the government's Front candidate. Rojas has also been told by some of his followers that he has the almost unanimous support of retired non-

commissioned officers—a not at all unlikely development.

Evaristo Sourdis was not a real presidential contender before the Conservative convention. He does not have as much political support as the convention vote would indicate because his strength is based primarily on the anti-Pastrana vote. Nevertheless, Sourdis can count on votes from Atlantic Coast areas, and a group of over 100 Conservative leaders recently issued a declaration of support for his candidacy. Most of them are from the coastal departments and represent the majority of the syndicate that supported him during the abortive Conservative convention, but he has picked up support in other areas as well.

Belisario Betancur could be Pastrana's most dangerous opponent. His "popular" convention in late October was an indication of mounting discontent within Conservative ranks, especially regarding the long domination of the party by the Ospina family. He enjoys the support of the Union of Colombian Workers, the country's largest labor organization. This is significant in itself because the democratic labor movement has never before become involved in a presidential election. Betancur also has the support of the small Social Christian Democratic Party and its youth group and of former President Valencia. Although Betancur was not successful in his drive to become the Front's official candidate, he has accepted the platform for the next administration agreed to by the leadership of both parties. Betancur has run a much more professional campaign than has the Front's standard-bearer, and he appears to have more genuine popular appeal. In his campaign appearances, his charisma has gained him widespread support from the middle classes and the labor elements.

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VOTER APATHY

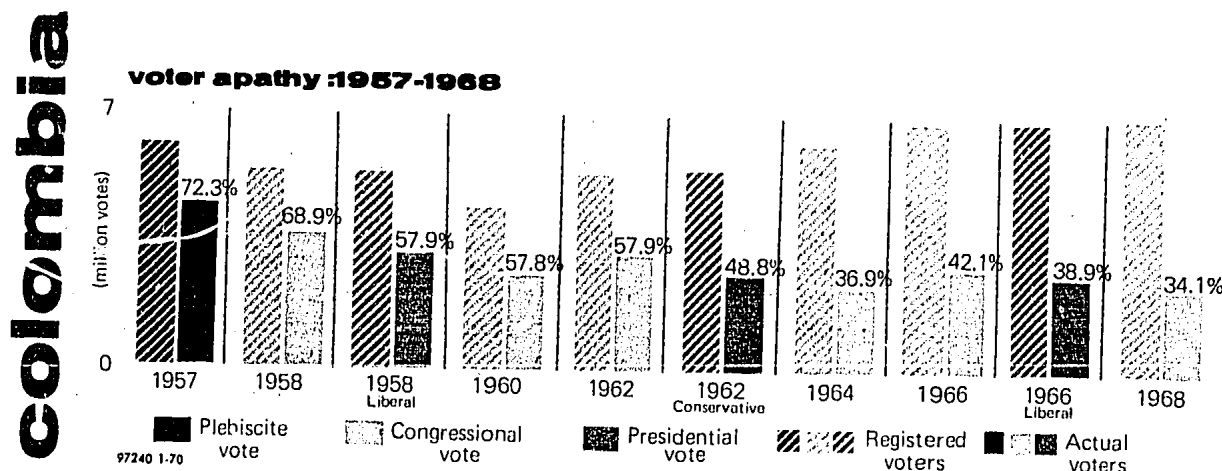
The political turmoil that surrounded the selection of a presidential candidate is more than just a protest against the National Front. It is symptomatic of a political system that has been led by a small number of wealthy, powerful men for more than a generation. The observance of the 20th anniversary of the Bogotazo (when popular Liberal leader Jorge Gaitan was killed, on 9 April 1948, and the bloody political violence began) brought home to some the realization that most of the names in the news on that infamous day still dominate Colombian politics—Ospina, Lleras, and others. New and fresh faces in the traditional parties are a rarity, not because the “grand old men” have won out against challenges, but because such challenges have rarely occurred. The traditional parties have no mechanism for training and pushing promising young leaders. This situation drains the parties of their vitality and reduces their appeal to the young.

Electoral participation has decreased steadily since the plebiscite in 1957, when the National Front system was approved. In the congressional elections of 1968, the most recent, only about 34 percent of the eligible voters exercised their right.

Voter abstention is indicative of the apathy exhibited by a majority of Colombians toward the political process that keeps them from exercising a free choice. Part of the explanation for this apathy can be found in the narrow confines in which political activity is conducted. The two traditional parties historically have been elitist and personalistic in character, and the loyalties of the masses of ordinary Colombians who call themselves Liberals or Conservatives have usually been toward the parties regardless of specific policies.

There are indications already that leftist extremist students are forming nationwide committees to encourage even more abstentionism in protest of the “establishment.” Another group made up of dissident Roman Catholic priests wants its followers to boycott the elections because it considers them a fraud perpetrated by the country’s ruling oligarchy in order to maintain the status quo and to continue exploiting the poor and oppressed.

On the other hand, because of the lively competition, voter participation may increase. The political infighting and the wide choice of candidates make the election attractive to those



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that have complained in the past that the president was preselected. Furthermore, both the presidential and legislative elections will be held on the same day, which has not been the case in the past.

The small Colombian Communist Party is already marshaling its supporters to vote, inasmuch as this is the first election in which other than the two major parties could participate at the municipal and departmental levels.

CONCLUSIONS

The circumstances surrounding the election make it clear that a strong president will be of paramount importance if the National Front is to be kept intact until it must be disbanded in 1974. Certain Conservative politicians believe that the country is not ready to return to full democratic processes and are urging that the Front be extended. Liberal Party leaders oppose such a suggestion because their party is the largest in the country and they stand to gain the most in open elections.

The plethora of presidential aspirants may well keep any one of them from receiving a large popular mandate. Even more so than in the past few years, however, the new president will be

faced with a hostile or often noncooperative congress and coalition because the losing candidates will have large numbers of supporters in elective legislative positions.

Only a strong president will be able to ensure Colombia's continued economic development and political stability. Renewed political activity by all parties at the municipal and departmental levels in the April election will result in an increase in anti-Front activity. Moreover, during the next four years, elements of the Liberal and Conservative parties will desert the Front and will resume normal political activity, which could lead to a renewal of politically inspired violence.

If the new president is unwilling or unable to deal forcefully with such a development, there may be mounting pressure within the military for a take-over of the government. The military probably would rule until another arrangement such as the Front could be established. In any event, it appears that whoever emerges victorious will have a difficult presidency. Should Pastrana win, he would govern with the full support of the National Front machinery, but even so, his presidency probably would be the most difficult in the Front's history.

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